

B. The Rumours, the Orders and the Reactions

In the autumn of 1941, several refugees appeared, who had managed to cross the eastern front line and reach the ghetto.

They told of the systematic extermination of Jews in eastern Poland. The rumours were supplemented by several measures by the authorities, which aroused serious suspicions - city courts were ordered to stop all legal proceedings against Jews and not to open new cases. In the second order, issued by the electricity company, all ghetto residents were required to pay in advance for the two winter months. Both orders created a harsh impression in the ghetto, "that something collective could happen to the entire public and therefore the measures against the individual are being cancelled."¹

In addition, at the end of the summer of 1942, the German tax authorities turned to the *Judenrat* with a demand to pay all the tax debts of the ghetto residents within two weeks. Through the mediation of a German official, the amount was reduced and divided into instalments, of which the Jews managed to pay only the first instalment.²

But worst of all was the feeling of being cut off from the world.

At the end of 1941, the ghetto was closed - in April 1942, all permits to leave the city expired.³ In July 1942, a decree was issued according to which every Jew must have a "work permit" with a photo. So as to find many jobs, the *Judenrat* decided to establish a series of workshops, in the *Metalurgia* factory building, for tailors, furriers, shoemakers, etc. For the intellectuals and rabbis, "brigades" of street cleaners and gardeners were organised. The new city governor, Dr Eberhard Franke, in exchange for the permit to establish the workshops, demanded a "compensation" of one and a half million złoty!⁴

During those months, word of mouth spread in the ghetto about a strange incident - the daughter of one of the city's dignitaries, who had married a German before the War and lived in Berlin, sent her parents a letter asking them to commit suicide because, thanks to her husband's connections, she had learned that a general extermination of the Jews in the occupied countries was expected. So, it will be better for the parents to commit suicide first, so that they would have a grave on which she could lie down and cry...⁵

How did the people react to the rumours?

¹ Landau, YVA, 0.3/5868, pp. 29-30.

² Alfred A. Kromołowski, Wspomnienia z Częstochowy, YVA, 0-33/1911, II, pp. 463-464

³ Kurier Częstochoski, 27th March 1942, p. 3

⁴ Jan Pietrzykowski: W obliczu śmierci: Przyczynki do historii Częstochowy w okresie hitlerowskiej okupacji, (Katowice: Śląsk, 1966) p. 69

⁵ Szlojme Waga, "The Terror Increases", *Sefer Częstochowa*, p. 103.

Frida Herszlikowicz answers:

“My younger brother wanted to escape to Russia several times, but my sister-in-law said that he wouldn’t make it. So, in 1942, we were all together... We didn’t know that there was Treblinka and Auschwitz, but we knew that the situation was not good. The young people could have looked for some way out, but their conscience wouldn’t let them leave their mothers and fathers”.

The first to protest the passive policy of the *Judenrat* were the leaders of the “Workers’ Council” but, in May 1942, some of them were captured and sent to Auschwitz.

In that atmosphere of depression and despair, people behaved in different ways. Jeszajahu Landau distinguishes four forms of response:

- Some fell into the abyss of despair and pinned all their hopes on God. This group closed itself off in the nuclear family unit and, even in the daily struggle for existence, accepted the verdict without appeal.
- The second group was active, seeking ways to help each other in the name of human values. From among them emerged those who cared for the needs of relief, health and education for the masses and, among them, later appeared those who supported armed rebellion.
- In the third group, indifference to everything that was happening outside was prominent, due to the burden of the daily troubles of hunger, work, illness and cold.
- In the fourth group were all those who lacked nothing and decided to enjoy life, as much as possible. Their slogan was “*Let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we shall die.*” [Isaiah 22:3]

It is no wonder that, in light of this situation, in the eyes of the vast majority of the public, rebellion seemed like an act of madness, which would only make it easier for the oppressor to exterminate everyone.

The *Judenrat* knew this too. In August 1942, Natan Ek, who had escaped from Warsaw, arrived in the Częstochowa Ghetto. He told the members of the *Judenrat* about the mass deportation of Warsaw’s Jews to Treblinka and was surprised by the restrained reaction of the listeners. The reason for the apparent calm was explained by one of those present:

“If this is a decree that does not apply to each and every city, we have reason to hope that we will not be affected. However, if this disaster applies to the entire Jewish community and cannot be avoided, then all the talk is in vain.”⁶

⁶ Ek, *Wandering on the Roads of Death...* p. 81.